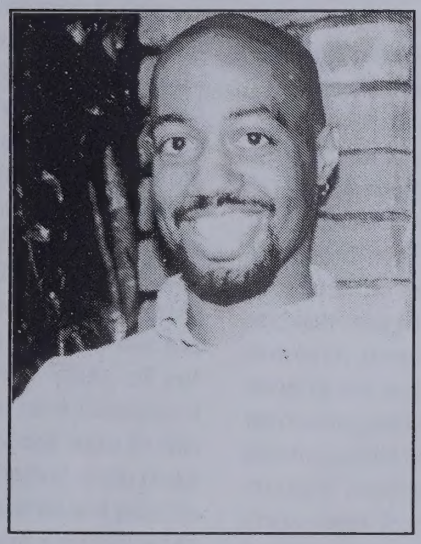
VOLUNTEERISM:

GIVING THE GIFT OF TIME

By Craig Washington



In a society where time is often equated with money, why do some people "give up" their time and energy without "gettin' paid." Are they really that generous? Or do they simply have time on their hands to parcel off to any deserving cause? Is volunteerism influenced by race, class, gender or sexual orientation? Do African-Americans volunteer any more or less than white Americans?

These questions and the myth and speculation they elicit come up often in my line of work. As a program coordinator for a large AIDS service organization, I work with volunteers on a daily basis. I also collaborate with other coordinators within my agency and throughout the community. I coordinate AID Atlanta's African-American Outreach program which targets much needed AIDS awareness and education to our people.

I've learned a great deal about volunteering over the past four years. When I learned of my HIV status, I was challenged by fear, guilt, and shame. Even though I was blessed with many potentially supportive friends, some of whom were AIDS activists, I disclosed to a select few. I eventually joined the Brooklyn AIDS Task Force as a volunteer. Working for the cause of my generation was more fulfilling than I'd expected. The experience enriched my life both as an individual and as a member of the affected community. I was contributing something to my brothers and sisters and that, to me, was "gettin' paid" in full. I was also magnifying my personal blessings, taking control of an adverse situation and turning it into something good. I had a full-time job and volunteered 10-15 hours a week and still wanted to do more.

When I moved to Atlanta in 1992, I started with AID Atlanta as an outreach volunteer.

The theme for 1994 World Aids Day was "family", which was appropriate for our Aid Atlanta program. Our experiences over the past two years have definitely bonded us in a family way. As Aretha once said, "thank you for my good sisters, thank you for my brothers." Two of our brothers Bernard and Ernest were called home this year but still walk with us in all the work we do.

Most of the volunteers are women and gay men. I believe this is fairly representative of overall volunteer trends throughout our society, especially among African-Americans. In my experience, the vast majority of African-American volunteers have been women. This isn't surprising when you consider that much of African-American volunteerism is centered within the church. Look at the make-up of our churches — even though most of the mainstream black churches are male-led, the congregations are overwhelmigly female. Regarding sociopolitical activism, black female volunteers have been at the forefront of every social movement in our history, often without official leader status.

Most of the readers of this magazine already know how the AIDS epidemic has affected black gay men. Many of our brothers who might not have considered volunteering have a personal stake in this cause. This is clearly reflected in the ranks of AIDS workers (volunteered and paid) in Atlanta. Just as gay white men rallied to educate themselves and each other, our gay brothers and sisters must do the same and in doing so, address the collaborative ills of racism and homophobia within the communities to which we belong.

Although a number of black lesbians and gays (BL+Gs) serve as volunteers, the response isn't nearly commensurate with the needs and the numbers infected.

It is alarming to see so few new faces among the ranks of African-American lesbians and Gay men. It means that many of the veteran volunteers will burn out much more quickly. Those of us who are infected are often debilitated by serial illnesses; some of us die, so there is no such thing as too many volunteers.

Many BL+Gs shun any form of activism for fear of being outted either in terms of sexual orientation or HIV status. There are black lesbians who erroneously perceive themselves as not-at-risk and thus do not become involved or even educated about what's going on. AND THE BAND STILL PLAYS ON!!

I don't typically see a large number of African-American heterosexual men involved in any volunteer efforts. It might be that many brothers define their time as synonymous with money and both as limited. There are in fact, some altruistic brothers who serve as mentors, big brothers and outreach workers. Several of the street outreach programs targeting substance abusers are manned by straight-identified recovering addicts. However, we need and should expect more participation from our straight brothers, our elected officials, grass-roots leaders, our pastors and our bourgeois social/professional clubs. ALL NEED TO WAKE UP AND ANSWER THE CALL.

The African-American Outreach (AAO) volunteers have had difficulties in evolving a trusting relationship with the host agency. The Volunteers initially perceived their host agency as unresponsive to the needs of our community. Despite serving a predominantly black client caseload, the agency had not established the history of collaborators necessary to engage the trust of the people. The very concept of African-American outreach had not been duly prioritized despite the changing profile of AIDS. The AAO volunteers demanded support in the targeted literature and public relations

materials. Although we have garnered increased support, several volunteers feel the agency should expand community outreach beyond the activities of one program. Studies have indicated that African-Americans are far more likely to volunteer with predominantly black organizations. As with other groups, many African-Americans are more comfortable working among each other. In legally desegregated society such as ours, social segregation as well as institutionalized racism are still alive and well. In many instances, we find it more approprite to work within our social circles, churches, civic groups, and institutions.

In the past, African-Americans have launched massive volunteer-based programs for social concerns deemed deserving. From the abolitionist movement through Garveyism; from student sit-ins through the D.C. black pride march, we have donated our resources without pay to ensure our survival and progress. Regarding AIDS, we have allowed the confluence of social stigma, homophobia and prudishness to delay/diminish our response to this most ominous threat. We cannot afford to wait for formal leaders to legitimize our mobilization. We, all of us—grandmothers, high school students, buppies and drag queens must invite a roots movement (s) to stem the tide of infection and disintegration of our families, our neighborhoods, our futures, our lives.

Craig Washington is Volunteer Coordinator for African-American Outreach at AID Atlanta.

ONE HOUR
MOTOPHOTO
& PORTRAIT STUDIO®

CHRISTIE THOMPSON

4060-B PEACHTREE RD., NE
ATLANTA, GEORGIA 30319
404-231-5192

RAINBOW
TRANSPORTATION
Non-Emergency, Private Pay Accepted
Johnnie Phillips
Sheila Minus
(404) 288-5298

LAMBDA APOTHECARY

DAN SHACKELFORD
PHARM.D.

595 PIEDMONT AVENUE, N.E.
SUITE D203
ATLANTA, GEORGIA 30308
(404) 875-9717
PAGER 417-7051
FAX 875-1754